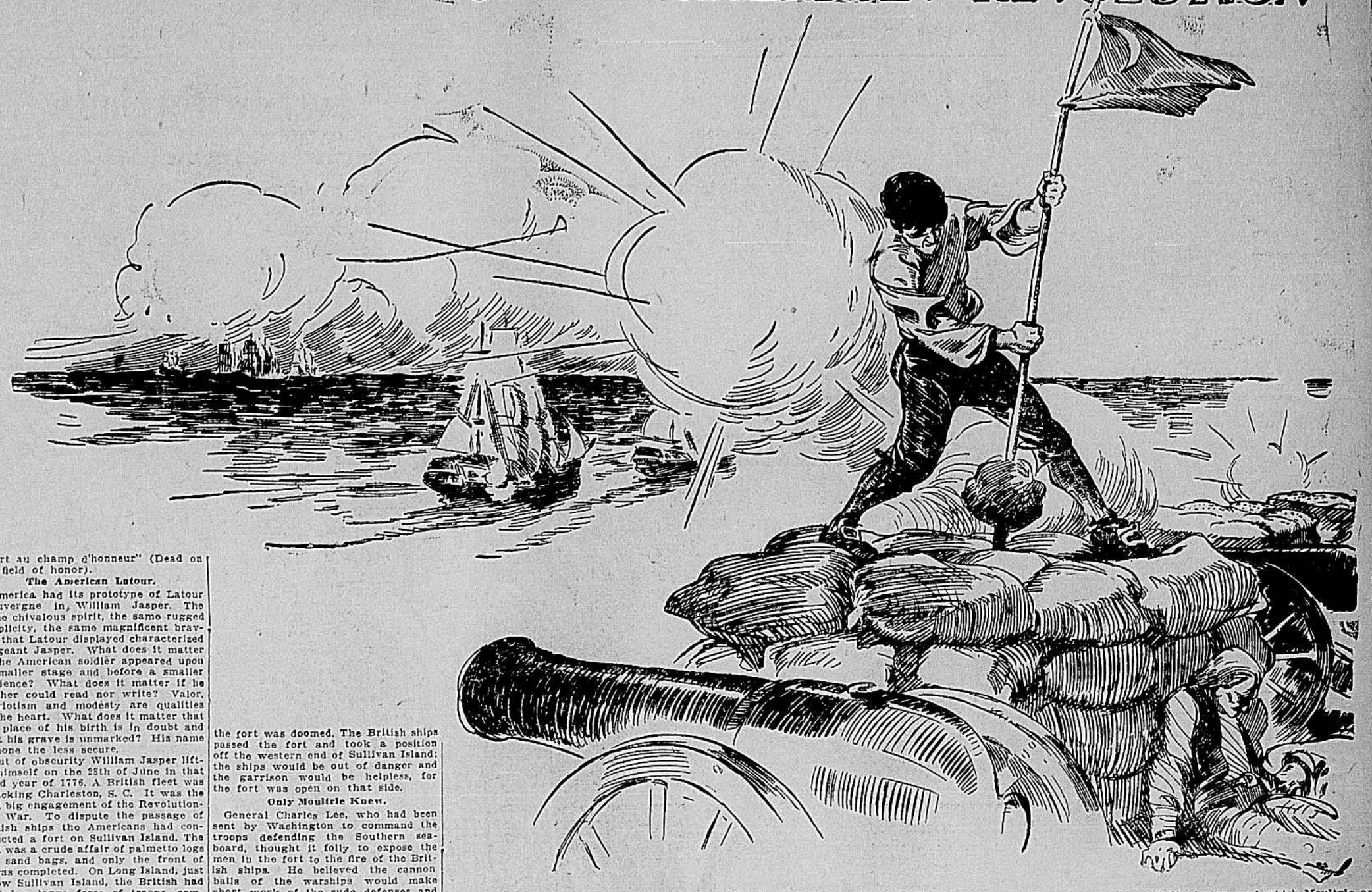
Sergeant Jasper.

THE LATOUR D' AUVERGNE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

Into the history of every nation there is woven the story of some one soldier of low rank whose valor and whose patriotism have thrilled the souls of men. France, with its glorious Latour, undoubtedly leads the world. A hundred poets have sung and as many biographers have written of his deeds, but time does not wither nor oft telling stale the beauty of the tale. Centuries hence its appeal will be as strong as it is to-day, for it has for its essence three elements—heroism, simplicity and love of country—without which life would be barren and governments could not endure.

A generous, kindly spirit was Latour d'Auvergne. The blood of one of the greatest nobles of France flowed in his veins, but never did he show envy or malice because the bar sinister robbed him of title or empty honors. Of a warrior race, he proved himself the warrior supreme. He was nearly fifty years old when France entered upon that period of blood and struggle almost without parallel in the history of the world. To him country meant more than King. In the army of the Alps, in the days of the Directory, he fought as grenadier. Columns might be shattered, generals might make mistakes, but Latour and his grenadiers never were known to fail. With sword or bayonet he led his men. No task was too desperate, no charge too hazardous for him. Soon the army rang with stories of his bravery. He was the first to enter Chambery, sword in hand. In battle he was all that was gallant. In victory he was all that was magnanimous, tender and humane. He lived a life of Spartan simplicity. No soldier could go hungry while he had a crust of bread; no wounded enemy uncovered while he had a blanket he could call his own. Promotion was offered to him a dozen times, but every time he declined. He would be a captain, nothing more.

Dead on the Field of Honor.

His example was an inspiration to the soldiers of France. Men craved to serve under the banner of Latour. The grenadiers developed into the flower of the army. When he was sent to the Pyrenees he commanded 8,000 men, but still he wore the uniform of a captain. So great a dread did the enemy have of the bayonets of Latour's Grenadiers that the corps got the name of the "infernal column."

From the army of the Pyrenees Napoleon sent him to the army of the Rhine, and, unable to get him to accept regular promotion, gave to him the title of "The First Grenadier of France." A wonderful leader he proved himself time and time again, but at Oberhausen, in Bavaria, on June 27, 1800, in the hour of victory, he was killed. Never to simple soldier was shown greater honor than to Latour d'Auvergne. The whole army of France mourned for him three days, and every soldier set aside one day's pay to buy a golden urn to hold his noble heart. His sword was sent to the Church of the Invalids to be treasured as one of the priceless glories of France, and then, by order of Napoleon, who knew how to do things well, there was inaugurated a custom that continued to the close of the empire. At the muster roll of his regiment each morning the name of Latour was called and the oldest sergeant stepped forward and answered: "Mort au champ d'honneur" (Dead on the field of honor).

The American Latour.

America had its prototype of Latour d'Auvergne in William Jasper. The same chivalous spirit, the same rugged simplicity, the same magnificent bravery that Latour displayed characterized Sergeant Jasper. What does it matter if the American soldier appeared upon a smaller stage and before a smaller audience? What does it matter if he neither could read nor write? Valor, patriotism and modesty are qualities of the heart. What does it matter that the place of his birth is in doubt and that his grave is unmarked? His name is none the less secure.

Out of obscurity William Jasper lifted himself on the 28th of June in that vivid year of 1776. A British fleet was attacking Charleston, S. C. It was the first big engagement of the Revolutionary War. To dispute the passage of British ships the Americans had constructed a fort on Sullivan Island. The fort was a crude affair of palmetto logs and sand bags, and only the front of it was completed. On Long Island, just below Sullivan Island, the British had landed a large force of troops, commanded by Sir Henry Clinton, which were to cross to Sullivan Island and attack the fort from the side and rear. To oppose Clinton 400 or 500 Americans, mostly picked riflemen, under Colonel Thompson and General Muhlenberg, were stationed at the east end of Sullivan Island.

If Clinton's force effected a landing the fort was doomed. The British ships passed the fort and took a position off the western end of Sullivan Island; the ships would be out of danger and the garrison would be helpless, for the fort was open on that side.

Only Moultrie Knew.

General Charles Lee, who had been sent by Washington to command the troops defending the Southern seaboard, thought it folly to expose the men in the fort to the fire of the British ships. He believed the cannon balls of the warships would make short work of the rude defenses and he feared the whole garrison would be slaughtered or captured if the ships passed the fort. Colonel William Moultrie, who was in charge of the fort, did not have Lee's military experience, but he knew more about the resisting force of sand and palmetto and he also had no end of faith in the fighting qualities of the men with him. The ships of the British were of the best of the time. They threw a weight of metal sufficient to crumble any ordinary fort. The troops under Clinton were British regulars, classed as the best fighting men of the world. The American fort, hastily put up, only half finished and defended by men whose experience in warfare was confined principally to Indian warfare, seemed but a scant shield for the city.

There was some hope that the marksmen under Thompson and Muhlenberg might hold Clinton's men back for a time, but this was a hope only.

On balcony, on roof and in church steeple the people of Charleston gathered to witness so much of the contest Sphinx, Syren, Thunderbomb, Ranger as they could. Above Fort Sullivan they could see the new South Carolina flag of Independence. It had a blue body and in an upper corner was a crescent. The stars and stripes had not come into service at that time. So long as the people could see the flag on Fort Sullivan Charleston was safe.

With beating hearts the watchers saw the stately warships form in line of battle and move upon the fort. The Active, Bristol, Experiment and Solebay led. Then came the Actaeon, and Friendship. They saw the flagship of the commodore, Sir Peter Parker, come abreast of the fort, and then it seemed in an instant that fort and ships were turned into volcanos. Flashes and roars, thunderous crashes and great volumes of smoke followed each other at intervals of only a few seconds. Soon the smoke obscured most of the view and they could see only the flag of Independence and the topmasts of the warships. How the tide of battle went they could not tell, but they watched the flag. Hour after hour they heard the thunder of the guns. So long as it lasted the city was safe, but they relied more on the flag above the fort. Once in a while a cloud of smoke would hide it from view, but not for long.

The Fall of the Flag.

Higher and higher rose the spirits of the watchers as the hours passed. Suddenly at the heighth of their joy the flag went down. From housetop and belfry went forth the cry that the fort had fallen. It was taken up and carried throughout the city. A sort of panic possessed many of the people. The thing they feared and expected had happened, and now that it had come to pass they were at a loss what to do. Some made hasty preparations to leave the city.

Others ran about aimlessly. To those who were alarmed the fact that the thunder of the guns continued increased their fright at first, but then perplexed them. Why was the cannonading kept up if the fort had surrendered? Were the British so merciless as to continue the slaughter? Then there came the suggestion that maybe the fort had not surrendered; maybe the fight still was on. While they were in doubt there came first from one steeple and then another a cheer that told its own story, a cheer that brought joy to the hearts of many who had been deep in despair. The flag of Independence was floating once more above the fort.

It was not until late that night, for the battle lasted until nearly 9 o'clock, that they heard the story of how the flagstaff, which had been the mast of a schooner, had been struck by a cannon ball and riven. The flag itself had fallen outside the fort. Working at one of the guns along with Marion and his men was Sergeant Jasper. He had been one of the first to volunteer when there was a call to arms. He was only twenty-six.

As the flag fell he looked dismayed. He had been one of those to raise it that morning. Then the look of dismay faded and one of resolution took its place. The fire of the British was incessant. A hail of shot was passing over or striking the fort. That mattered little to Jasper. He leaped on the parapet and walked nearly its whole where the flag had fallen. Picking length before he reached the spot up the standard he fastened it to a sponge staff and then set the staff firmly upon a bastion. The flag waving once more, he jumped within the fort. That was all.

Walking into the jaws of death to save the flag was not the whole service Jasper rendered. Above all other things his service was in typifying at that moment the spirit of the American people. Such an act at such a time and under such conditions means more than any ordinary deed of valor.

The Vanquished Fleet.

It was a wonderful story the people of Charleston got Piecemeal that night. The British fleet that had advanced so proudly to blow the crude fort off the face of the earth had retired shattered and beaten. The commodore was wounded. Captain Morris, of the British, was mortally injured. Forty dead and seventy wounded was the story of the flagship. With the Experiment the tale was as bad almost, for twenty-three dead and seventy-six wounded was the tally. With the other vessels the casualties were light comparatively, but all suffered. Three that tried to get past the fort to sweep it from the west grounded on a shoal, and one of the three, the Actaeon, was burned by the British to save it from capture.

And General Clinton with Lord Cornwallis and his troops fared almost as badly. The sharpshooters at the eastern end of the island had waited patiently until the flatboats carrying the British regulars got well within range and then opened fire. 'Twas useless to attempt a landing under such a fusillade. Several times the British attempted it. Each time they were driven back. Finding it was but a useless slaughter, Clinton gave it up.

Sad indeed was the procession that left Charleston Harbor the day after the battle. Of the fleet scarcely a vessel but was injured. Of the army, which was to overrun the Southern colonies, it had been defeated, if not disgraced, by volunteers. And of Moultrie's men only ten were killed and twenty-two wounded. More than a thousand shot were picked up about the fort. Hundreds of shells that came into the fort fell into a moat in the middle of the works, the water of which extinguished the fuses before the fire reached the powder. The palmetto logs had proved admirable for defense. The cannon balls sank into their soft, spongy pulp and remained there. They sent out no splinters either.

Like Latour.

As the vanquished fleet sailed away and all Charleston rejoiced, poor Jasper and some others among the defenders found it more difficult to face a grateful people than a hostile foe. To Jasper, the Governor of the State, John Rutledge, afterward Chief Justice of the United States, presented his handsome sword and thanked him in the name of his country. A lieutenant's commission, too, was offered to him. Neither sword or commission would he take. "I am but a sergeant," he declared. "I am not fit to keep officers' company."

Sergeant he was and sergeant he would remain. No argument could alter his determination. To keep him busy and give ample opportunity to him to exercise his keen wits a roving commission was given to him. As there was more activity in Georgia than about Charleston, he went there, and many are the exploits with which he is credited by tradition. As humane as he was brave, it is said he never injured an enemy unnecessarily, but a story of distress or of wrong would stir him to great emotion. One of the best stories about his doings while an independent rover is connected with a tale of distress. The British had a camp at Ebenezer, Ga., and had taken a prisoner named Jones there preparatory to sending him to Savannah for trial. Jones had been a loyalist and then had turned Continental, a capital crime in the eyes of the British. The night of the capture Jones's wife sent word to Jasper, begging him to save her husband's life. When the message reached Jasper he had only one companion, Sergeant Newton. He knew Jones and such other prisoners as were sent to Savannah would be under heavy guard, but he and Newton started at once. Savannah was in possession of the British. A few miles out from the city on the road from Ebenezer there was a spring at which Jasper knew the guard and the prisoners would halt. For this point Jasper and Newton made all speed. Once there they hid in the bushes.

As they expected, the guard and the prisoners stopped to slake their thirst and rest. Eight men made up the guard. Two of the eight remained with the prisoners, while the other six stacked their muskets against a tree and proceeded to drink. Waiting for what they considered the opportune moment, Jasper and Newton crept out from the thicket, seized two of the muskets and shot the two guards who had been left with the prisoners. Then they overawed the other six who were at the spring.

The prisoners, who were in irons, soon were freed by Jasper; the guns of the former guards were put into their hands, and from the spring near Savannah the men who had been the prisoners marched their former guards to the American camp at Jurysville.

It reads like romance, but it is not. The spring is known to-day as Jasper's Spring.

Savannah.

Up and down through Georgia he roamed, battling with loyalist or Briton, fighting the good fight as best he knew, until what seemed to all to be the great occasion arose, when, in October, 1779, French and Americans combined to wrest Savannah from the British. For two years the city had been in possession of the enemy, and now a French fleet, acting in conjunction with General Lincoln's force, had the British bottled up. The arrival of the French fleet had been a surprise to the British, who were ill prepared for serious attack. Had Count d'Estaing, who commanded the French, more skill in warfare and less in letter writing, he could have forced the British to surrender. But he wasted most valuable time. He wrote pompous and grandiloquent manifestoes to General Prevost, which the British general read carefully, digested at his leisure, and did not answer until the last minute, and then in a spirit to bring another communication from the count.

Of course, the count wrote again, for he dearly loved to use his pen and tell of his achievements and predict what he was going to do when he started the works once more; but while the count wrote the British general worked. Whereas the defenses of Savannah had only twenty or thirty guns when the French fleet arrived, they had 100 or more when Count d'Estaing thought it time to quit writing and begin fighting. The city, from one that would have fallen before a well-directed attack, had been transformed into one that gave every advantage to the defenders.

The assault was made on October 9 and the main storming party was directed against a redoubt on Spring Hill. This storming party was commanded by D'Estaing in person, assisted by General Lincoln. Fog and darkness permitted the allies to get close to the redoubt before they were discovered, but as daylight dawned they were subjected to a frightful fire. Their ranks were decimated and the whole force thrown into confusion.

Twice the allies reached the parapet and planted their standards there. One of the banners was the Lily of France; the other was the blue and crescent flag of Independence which Mrs. Elliott had given to Moultrie's regiment three days after the battle of Charleston, and which Moultrie and all his men had sworn to defend to the end. The French standard had been raised by one of D'Estaing's aids and as he raised it he fell, pierced by a musket ball. The flag of the Second Carolina Regiment had been planted by Lieutenants Hume and Bush. They, too, fell mortally wounded. The banner drooped and fell, and Lieutenant Gray, who next took it upon himself to raise it, met a like fate.

Saving the Banner.

Few officers of the Carolina regiment were left. The attack had failed, but the banner of blue, with the liberty crescent was not to trail in the dust. When Gray fell, Jasper, who had been sorely wounded early in the action, struggled through the ditch, up the parapet and replaced the flag where it had been planted by Lieutenant Bush. To touch that flag seemed to mean death that day, for no sooner had Jasper set it on the parapet, than he received a second, and this time, a fatal wound.

Suffering the most agonizing pain from this second wound, Jasper held his banner steady for a time, and then, realizing that it would fall into the enemy's hands if it remained there, he summoned all his waning strength and carried the flag back to his company.

"I have got my furlough," he murmured as he was carried dying from the field.

The banner he died in saving was captured later, in Charleston, when that city surrendered to the British, and now is one of the war trophies to be seen in the British Museum.

Sergeant he was in his first battle and sergeant he was in his last. Like Latour, greater honor was shown to him than to many a general officer. In the city of Savannah there is a noble monument perpetuating his deeds. He is shown with the banner held ahigh. There is Jasper Square named in his honor, and there is a Jasper county to testify to the State's regard.

But South Carolina, the land of his birth, the State under whose flag he fought and saving whose colors he died, has done little in remembrance of her gallant, though humble son. Maybe some day the Second Carolina will take a leaf out of the book of Napoleon. Maybe at the muster roll of the regiment the name of Jasper will be called and the oldest sergeant in the service will step forward and answer, "Dead on the Field of Honor."